

From Game Shows to Estate Plans: Insights from Regis Philbin

Regis Philbin, the Guinness World Record holder for the most hours on US television, was a familiar face in millions of homes for decades. By the time he retired from his show *Live with Regis and Kelly* in 2011, he had spent more than 16,740 hours in front of the camera.¹

Philbin passed away in 2020, leaving an estate worth approximately \$150 million² that was likely divided between his wife, Joy, and his children. He had four children: Danny (who died in 2014) and Amy from his first marriage and daughters Joanna and Jennifer with Joy. While Philbin accumulated most of his net worth as the host of game and talk shows, his estate planning documents and court records show that he also left millions in other assets behind.

More Properties, More Problems

At the time of his passing, Philbin owned at least two properties: a Manhattan apartment³ and a Beverly Hills condo.⁴

According to Radar Online, Philbin's estate filed a will with New York Surrogate's Court (i.e., probate court) that listed \$16.5 million in property and millions more in stocks, bonds, and cash to be overseen by his wife, Joy, as the executor of his will.⁵ However, a large portion of his estate was placed into a trust containing assets not listed in the will, court documents show.⁶

That trust could have contained his New York and California homes, which would have spared Joy and the rest of his loved ones the considerable hassle of probating properties in multiple states.

Real property titled in an individual's name (as opposed to being held in a revocable living trust) that is located in a state other than where the individual lives may require a separate probate proceeding in each state where the property is located. State laws vary, but New York's probate process is notoriously slow and burdensome (especially in New York County, where Manhattan is), while California's comes with both statutory attorney and statutory executor fees based on the estate's gross value.

Predeceased Heirs and Plan Updates

A notable aspect of Regis's plan was that he updated it following the death of his son, Danny.

¹ *Most hours on US television*, Guinness World Records Limited 2025, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-hours-on-us-television> (last visited July 30, 2025).

² *Regis Philbin Net Worth \$150 Million*, Celebrity Net Worth (Jan. 30, 2025), <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/regis-philbin-net-worth>.

³ Mike Mishkin, *Upper West Sider, Regis Philbin, Dies at 88*, I Love the Upper West Side (July 25, 2020), <https://www.ilovetheupperwestside.com/upper-west-sider-regis-philbin-dies-at-88>.

⁴ *Teles Cofounder Ernie Carswell Reps Regis Philbin in Condo Buy*, Medium (Mar. 2, 2016), <https://medium.com/real-estate-reimagined/teles-cofounder-ernie-carswell-reps-regis-philbin-in-condo-buy-effed2929507>.

⁵ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

⁶ *Id.*

Born with a spinal cord defect, Danny died of natural causes in November 2014, predeceasing his father by nearly six years.⁷

Regis signed his final will just two months later, on January 15, 2015.⁸ The timing of these events is probably not a coincidence. Regis's 2015 estate plan is a case study in why estate plans must change with life. The death of a child, the birth of a grandchild, a new marriage, or a change in financial circumstances are some of the key life events that should trigger clients to revisit their plan. An outdated estate plan may not reflect a person's wishes at the time of their death and could result in outcomes they would never have chosen.

My Three Daughters

Blended families are becoming increasingly common in America. Today, approximately one in six children grows up in a blended household, and nearly two in five families include a stepparent.⁹ These numbers continue to rise as remarriage becomes more common.

While Philbin did not necessarily live in a blended household, he did have children from different relationships. It would not be uncommon in that situation to face challenges when deciding how to fairly structure an estate plan. Reports indicate that Philbin took a thoughtful approach, providing for his surviving spouse and their children in common while also making provisions for the children from his earlier relationship.

However, when it came to appointing someone to carry out the terms of his will in probate court (called the *executor* in New York), Philbin prioritized his wife and their children by leaving clear instructions. "I appoint my spouse, Bette Joy Philbin, as my Executor of this Will," Philbin's will states.¹⁰ "If my spouse shall not qualify or, having qualified, at any time shall not continue to act, then I appoint my daughter Joanne Philbin as successor Executor of this Will."¹¹ "If Joanne Philbin shall not qualify or, having qualified, at any time shall not continue to act, then I appoint my daughter, Jennifer Philbin, as successor Executor of this Will."¹²

This language provides a crucial estate planning lesson to build contingencies into a plan, including having backup decision-makers and heirs. While Danny's passing underscores the need to update documents as circumstances change, sometimes changes occur after the client's death, which is why every estate plan should include backup executors, trustees, and beneficiaries to ensure that someone trusted—and chosen by the client—is always available to step in.

Give Your Clients a Lifeline

⁷ Stephanie Dube Dwilson, *Daniel Philbin's Cause of Death: How Did Regis Philbin's Son Die?* (EntertainmentNow (Dec. 19, 2024), <https://entertainmentnow.com/news/daniel-philbin-regis-son>).

⁸ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

⁹ Kristin McCarthy, M.Ed., *Blended Family Statistics: A Deeper Look Into the Structure*, Love to Know (Aug. 5, 2021), <https://www.lovetoknow.com/parenting/parenthood/blended-family-statistics>.

¹⁰ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

As a former host of the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* television game show, Philbin gave contestants three “lifelines” to help them answer a question if they needed it: narrowing down their multiple choice options from four to two, phoning a friend to ask them for their insights, or polling the audience. However, clients need a more reliable strategy for their estate plan. Philbin did not leave his “final answer” up to chance—and neither should your clients.

Regis asked “Who wants to be a millionaire?,” but the more important question is, “Who wants their millions to go where they intended?”. We are here to help you answer it.